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While California considers fracking rules, legal battles flare elsewhere

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As California considers rules for hydraulic fracturing, a legal battle in Wyoming over regulations for the controversial drilling process could underscore the flash points in the coming debate here.

A coalition of environmental groups is suing the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission over that state's "fracking" rules, arguing that regulators are rubber-stamping requests by oil and gas companies to keep secret certain chemicals they inject into the earth to break apart rock and release fossil fuels.

According to Earthjustice, a San Francisco-based nonprofit law firm representing the environmental groups, Wyoming regulators have approved 50 secrecy claims, allowing companies to withhold information about more than 190 chemicals.

Oral arguments in the case began in Natrona County District Court on Tuesday.

Environmentalists in California have raised similar concerns about Sacramento's proposed rules for fracking.

Draft regulations released by regulators last month would allow companies to file trade secret claims for chemicals they consider to be proprietary. Mark Nechodom, director of the state Department of Conservation, has said that public health and safety will "not be overshadowed by concerns about trade secret protections."

The issue of fracking is particularly potent in Wyoming, where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tied the cause of water contamination to fluids used in hydraulic fracturing. The agency's draft report, issued in 2011 but still not finalized, said the best explanation for the pollution was that fluids had migrated up from fracking operations and contaminated an aquifer.

Oil and gas operators there have contested the findings, saying the federal investigators' testing methods may have tainted water samples.

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